

(211)

23 March 1976

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Deteriorating Situation in Lebanon

The continuing heavy fighting in Beirut has made it at least temporarily impossible to proceed with implementation of the Syrian-sponsored political compromise announced by President Franjiah yesterday.

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With Lebanese leftist militiamen emboldened by their success in wresting most of the hotel district from the Christians and Kamal Jumblatt's rejection of the political solution approved by the Lebanese cabinet, Asad may now decide that he must increase the military pressure still further. The Syrians see the leftist attack in the hotel district as directly aimed at undermining their mediation effort.

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The Lebanese left, which at the moment is comprised of an alliance of the forces of Socialist leader Jumblatt, Muslim radical Ibrahim Qulaylat, and rebel Muslim army officer Ahmad Khatib, has the ability to secure control of the hotel district and most commercial areas in central Beirut. The leftists probably could force the Christians out of the port district and President Franjiah out of the presidential palace of Babda. Nevertheless, the leftists, even with active Palestinian backing, could not overrun the Christian suburbs of Beirut, nor could they penetrate the Christian core area northeast of the city.

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If the leftists win the active support of large numbers of rejectionist fedayeen or the major fedayeen groups, however, Damascus would be forced to bring in greater numbers of more heavily armed Syrian regulars operating as Syrian units. The existing mixed units would prove much less effective in direct clashes with the fedayeen, largely because discipline within the Liberation Army would erode quickly if the group were fighting other Palestinians.

We expect that Fatah chief Yasir Arafat will make every effort to stay out of a direct clash with either the Lebanese Christians or the Syrians. He has been providing support both to Khatib and to Jumblatt, however, and his forces could be drawn into at least brief clashes with the Syrians or Syrian-controlled forces if he thought the fedayeen's freedom of action in Lebanon were fundamentally threatened. Both Damascus and Arafat would have great interest in negotiating a quick end to any such clashes. Syria wants to avoid damage to its role as premier defender of the Palestinians, and to avoid having to bring into Lebanon so large a Syrian force that Israel would conclude that it had no choice but to respond by invading southern Lebanon. Arafat, over the long term, is heavily and unavoidably dependent on Syria's good will.

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